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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to find out what Greek historians actually said about athletics during the centuries 700 B.C. to 400 A.D. To achieve this, the writings of Greek historians were systematically examined for words, phrases, sentences, and comments pertaining to or mentioning Greek athletics and athletes. These were recorded on separate cards, and eventually classified according to topic. Topics were then grouped under the following three headings: (1) the individual and athletics; (2) festivals; and (3) outgrowths of athletics. Concepts related to the role of athletics in Greek society were derived from these groupings of quotations and references. In relation to the first topic, it was found that the individual athlete in Greek society benefited from athletics both intrinsically and extrinsically through individual exercise and public honor. Concerning the second topic, it was found that attending festivals and athletic contests was a way of life for the Greek people (historians mentioned 37 different festivals and countless other athletic contests which were not given specific names). With regard to the third topic, it was found that almost everyone in the Greek world was affected by athletics, either directly or indirectly. For example, time was measured in Olympiads, locations were given in relation to athletic sites, and artists used athletes as models for their works. In conclusion, the author states that athletics and sport were integral to the thinking and concerns of Greek historians. (Author/BD)

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GREEK ATHLETICS IN THE WRITINGS OF THE GREEK HISTORIANS

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This study was undertaken to find out what the Greek historians actually said about athletics and athletes during the centuries 700 B.C. to A.D. 400. In many secondary sources pertaining to Greek athletics, writers have tended to disregard the works of the historians.

The writings of the Greek historians available in English translation, primarily from the Loeb Classical Library of Greek authors, were examined systematically for comments pertaining to or mentioning Greek athletics and athletes. The material was then classified into topics which were grouped under three headings. These headings were The Individual and Athletics, Festivals, and Outgrowths of Athletics.

Under the heading of the Individual and Athletics the reader discovers that the athlete received both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. He, the individual, benefited from exercise as it aided his eating and restored his body. He competed for a wreath and the honor attached thereto. The custom of giving a wreath dates quite early. Plutarch related in the Life of Theseus "... that he instituted athletic contests in Delos, and that the custom was then begun by him of giving a palm to the victors."[1] The custom of receiving a wreath for a victory was neither universal nor understood in the ancient world as a whole, and Herodotus told a story in his Histories which clearly makes this point:

> There was one Persian in particular who... asked what prize the athletes were contending while watching athletic contests and chariot races at the Olympic festival. The Arcadians mentioned the wreath of olive-leaves which it is our custom to give. This drew from Tritantaechmes a remark which proved his true nobility of character--though it made Xerxes call him a coward; for when he learned that the prize was not money but a wreath, he could not help crying out in front of everybody, "Good heavens, Mardonius, what kind of men are these that

> you have brought us to fight against--men who compete with one another for no material reward but only for honour."[2] (5th cent. B. C.)

The astonishment expressed by the Persian seems to be countered by Dio Chrysostom, who elaborated on the honor of receiving the Olympic crown:

> You doubtless know that the Olympian crown is of olive leaves, and yet this honour many people have preferred to life itself, not because there is anything wonderful about the olive that grows there but because it is not given carelessly or for slight achievement.[3]

The extrinsic rewards for the successful athlete included recognition and a chance for a lucrative occupation. He received money and other prizes for victories in major festivals, as well as sometimes being honored by having public buildings named after him. While mention of extrinsic rewards from athletics appears primarily in the writings of the later historians (Ex. Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, and Pseudo-Callisthenes) it is most often in reference to earlier times. Diodorus Siculus discussed fees and prizes in his Library of History, and Plutarch gave an explicit idea about how profitable winning could be in his Life of Solon when he stated:

> In the valuations of sacrificial offerings, at any rate, a sheep and a bushel of grain are reckoned at a drachma; the victor in the Isthmian games was to be paid a hundred drachmas, and the Olympic victor five hundred.[4]

The games and festivals were a vital part of Greek life. The Greek people held both major and minor festivals, and the events surrounding these festivals were extensively covered in the writings of the historians. The winner of the stadium race was mentioned most frequently. Diodorus Siculus names the winner of the stadium race throughout his Library of History. Many of the historians addressed themselves to the administration of the festivals. Repeated conflicts between Elis and Pisatis

concerning hosting the games were related by Xenophon, Diodorus Siculus, Pausanias, and Strabo. Herodotus relates a story about Elis asking advice from the Egyptians concerning the fair administration of the games. Egypt replied that to be fair no one from Elis should be allowed to compete, advice that Elis appeared to disregard, as there is evidence of victors from Elis after that time.

Diodorus Siculus gave an account of quarreling over who could conduct the Isthmian games. Pseudo-Callisthenes and Pausanias also addressed themselves to the conducting of the Isthmian games.

There was repeated mention of athletic contests while on military campaigns. Arrian, Xenophon, Plutarch, Thucydides, and Dio Cassius discussed military games. According to the accounts of Xenophon, the Greek troops carried on athletic contests throughout their Persian expedition.

Although festivals were extensively covered in the writings of the historians, their discussions relate primarily to the first five centuries after the resumption of the Olympic Games.

It was not merely the participant and the spectator who were influenced by athletics in the Greek world. Athletics were such an integral part of life that terminology of the athletic events was used as measures of distances for the everyday individual. The Olympic games were so well known that time was measured in Olympiads--the archon at Athens and the consuls in Rome were said to have reigned during Olympiads. Although Roman consular years were not dated by Olympiads, some historians referred to each consul in relation to appropriate Olympiads. The athletic facilities were so well known that they were used as a point of reference in giving directions to other locations.

An athlete was also portrayed in a philosophical discussion such as Plutarch related in his Life of Pericles: "When Archidamus, the king of the Lacedaemonians, asked him whether he or Pericles was the better wrestler, he replied, 'Whenever I throw him at wrestling he disputes the fall, and carries his point, and persuades the very men who saw him fall.'"[5] and

> For instance, a certain athlete had hit Epitimus the Pharasalian with a javelin, accidentally, and killed him, and Pericles, Xanthippus said, squandered an entire day discussing with Protagoras whether it was the javelin, or rather the one who hurled it, or the judges of the contests, that "in the strictest sense" ought to be held responsible for the disaster.[6]

The athletic theme also carried over into the language of the historians. Both Xenophon and Dio Chrysostom made use of sport for analogies. Xenophon compared kings with athletes in his account of Hiero and Dio Chrysostom compared the training of an athlete with preparing for public speaking in his Discourses.

The historians used athletics in their writings for comparisons. In Plutarch's Life of Cimon, he compared Cimon to an athlete as follows: "In this way Cimon, like a champion athlete, carried off two victories in a single day."[7] Pausanias stated: "They say Champion Hermes took the young men out to battle when the Eretrians sailed from Euboia to attack Tanagra, and fighting like a young man with an athlete's scraper he did more than anyone to rout the Euboians".[8]

Both Xenophon and Pausanias made comparisons to a race. Xenophon talked about soldiers rushing forward as though it was a race and Pausanias compared inscriptions to a two lap race track. Plutarch compared athletics to life in the Moralia. He stated:

> Finally, just as a body not conditioned by exercise cannot endure the sun without damage, neither can the guiding principle of an

> uncultivated soul sustain love without hurt: each degenerates alike and becomes afflicted, blaming the power of the god and not its own weakness.[9]

Greek athletics and athletes were truely an integral part of Greek life.

The concepts that were ultimately derived from this study tended to support knowledges pertaining to Greek athletics from other sources. What perhaps is significant was that the historians felt it necessary to include athletics as part of their writings pertaining to the history of Greece. These concepts include:

1. The individual athlete in Greek society benefitted from athletics intrinsically and extrinsically.

2. Exercise was valued by the individual and thought to restore his body and improve his health.

3. One competed in a festival for the honor of victory and a wreath during the earlier period of Greek athletics.

4. Involvement in sport seemed to be a way of life for the people of the Greek world.

5. Later, success in athletics had extrinsic value--it could be profitable for the renown as well as the monetary rewards.

6. Victorious athletes were honored by statues, portraits made in their likeness, and buildings and race courses named after them.

7. Training for athletic events was also thought to be good training for other pursuits in life.

8. Athletic events were, at times, used as a political forum.

9. Many festivals were held in Greece, both major and minor.

10. Athletic terminology was so wide spread that terms became a part of every day language.

11. Athletics were used repeatedly as comparisons in the writings of the historians.

12. The athlete serves as a model for the artist.

FOOTNOTES

1. Plutarch, LIVES: THESEUS trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Vol. I (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1914), p. 45.

2. Herodotus, THE HISTORIES, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 507.

3. Dio Chrysostom, DISCOURSES XXXI - XXXVI, trans, J.W. Cohoon and H. Lamar Crosby (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 115.

4. Plutarch, LIVES: SOLON Vol. I, p. 467.

5. Idem, LIVES: PERICLES Vol. III, p. 23.

6. Ibid., p. 105.

7. Idem, THE RISE AND FALL OF ATHENS, p. 155.

8. Pausanias, GUIDE TO GREECE: BOIOTIA, Vol. I, trans. Peter Levi (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 353.

9. Plutarch, MORALIA, Vol. IX, trans. F.C. Babbitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 399.